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ABSTRACT

Described are uses of creative dramatics with handicapped and non-handicapped children and adults. Creative dramatics is seen to involve acting out situations without formal or strict guidelines, with focus on expression of one's feelings and working cooperatively with others. Activities and leadership hints are listed for warm-up games and exercises, pantomime, Orff-Schulwerk approach, presenting a story, and role playing. (JYC)

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PRACTICAL POINTERS

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CREATIVE DRAMATICS

The term creative dramatics implies acting out situations without formal or strict guidelines. The focus is on expression of one's feelings and working cooperatively with others. *Participation*, rather than finished *product* is emphasized.

Creative dramatics can contribute to development of:

- *verbal and nonverbal communication skills*
- *respect for other's attempts at expression and communication*
- *body awareness*
- *body coordination*
- *listening skills*
- *sensory awareness*
- *individuality within a group setting*
- *imagination*

Other values of creative dramatics experiences are:

- *opportunities for freedom of expression*
- *acceptable outlet for tension*
- *participation in a successful, fun experience*

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A wide variety of activities are possible in a creative dramatics program for individuals of all ages and abilities. For example, individuals who cannot speak can pantomime stories; persons with severe movement restrictions may perform as narrators; very young or severely retarded children can present simple stories or mimes; older individuals may want to write and improvise their own dramatic productions. All activities included in this PRACTICAL POINTER can be varied to suit the ages and abilities of participants.

WARM-UP GAMES AND EXERCISES

These activities help creative dramatics participants become more aware of their senses and bodies. Such awareness is extremely important as a prelude to more sophisticated activities. Exercises generally are conducted in a circle or with participants scattered around the room.

Exercise 1. *Listen* for all the sounds around you; each person in turn tell what he/she has heard.

Exercise 2. *Look* around the room and list all that you have seen after a certain amount of time.

Exercise 3. With a partner, *study* what the partner is wearing; the partner changes three things; what has been changed?

Exercise 4. *Touch* various objects (a ball bearing, dirt, sandpaper, a lizard) and *name the feeling* they give you.

Exercise 5. With hands behind back, *feel* various objects and *identify* them.

Exercise 6. *Identify* various *sounds* created by the leader (pebbles being dropped in a pail of water, light switch turned on/off, sweeping a floor, taking a wrapper off candy).

Exercise 7. Using the whole body, *pretend* to be a ballet dancer, inchworm, puppet on a string, racing car, rolling ball.

Exercise 8. Using only *fingers* and hands, be a butterfly, a snowstorm, three people walking together.

Leadership Hints. Since there are no right or wrong answers in creative dramatics, these activities are particularly good for groups that mix individuals of differing abilities. The leader should be sure to encourage different approaches to the same exercise. For example, in Exercise 4 recognize that not all participants will derive the same sensation from touching the same object, and discourage stereotyped responses by saying, "Who gets a different feeling from touching the dirt?" In exercises like 1 and 2 the leader can prevent competition from developing by asking each person in turn to name one thing that he/she has seen or heard, rather than letting each participant recite a list of all things seen/heard.

Severely retarded, speech impaired, or withdrawn participants may have had little experience in expressing themselves in a group. Some individuals may not know how to respond, even to activities that allow a wide range of responses. It may be best to

start these individuals in small groups with simple movement exploration activities to involve them in learning about parts of their bodies, movement, basic motor skills, and simple language and commands. Warm-up games and exercises can then be used to reinforce language concepts. For example, instead of having these participants identify sounds that they cannot see, show them a pail filled with water, drop pebbles in it, and have them name these objects; as language skills are acquired, use the exercises to elicit simple verbal responses.

When physically handicapped participants are involved, especially those having severe mobility limitations, use Exercise 7 to encourage movement and develop motor abilities. Again, since no response is right or wrong, recognize all attempts at movement, perhaps having participants explain why they chose a particular approach.

Exercises 1, 4, 5, and 6 are good for helping visually impaired persons strengthen their other senses, as well as preparing them for additional creative dramatics experiences. When having these individuals act out words or situations (as in Exercises 7 and 8), be sure you are using concepts with which they are familiar and can call upon past experience to perform.

PANTOMIME

Formation for these activities is the same as for warm-up games and exercises--all in a circle or scattered about the room. All individuals participate simultaneously and without verbalization, which makes pantomime particularly suitable for withdrawn and speech handicapped persons. Some individuals undoubtedly express themselves *best* this way.

Some examples of activities using pantomime are:

- *Participants are all mirrors and must reflect motions and expressions made by the leader; this can be done with partners, too.*
- *Let's pretend to be--*
  - *-- a spaceship blasting off;*
  - *-- cooked and uncooked spaghetti;*
  - *-- combing our hair;*
  - *-- riding a bumpy subway;*
  - *-- flipping pancakes;*
  - *-- playing basketball together;*
  - *-- cutting and raking grass;*
  - *-- a taxi driver.*

Leadership Hints. Be sure to draw upon experiences familiar to participants when creating pantomimes, especially with very young or low functioning children. Keep activities simple and short until participants become more adept and at ease. As individuals become less inhibited and embarrassed, half the group could serve as audience and half as performers, with individuals eventually performing alone. In some activities, such as mirroring, participants could eventually act as group leaders.

ORFF-SCHULWERK

This approach to creative dramatics began as a simplified approach to music and rhythm for the classroom. Originally introduced into the German school system by Carl Orff, the Orff-Schulwerk process was intended for children ages five through twelve. However, it has been successfully used with mentally retarded teens and adults. The process has also been used in a variety of settings--therapeutic, clinical, recreational, as well as educational.

Orff-Schulwerk starts with an idea, then expands on it through four process:

- *improvisation*
- *selectivity*
- *fulfillment*
- *closure*

A good example of the way in which these processes mesh is presented by the drama-music program at the Recreation Center for the Handicapped (207 Skyline Blvd., San Francisco, California 24132). At the beginning of an activity session with the Day Trippers, a group of 25 moderately mentally retarded adults, participants were asked if they had heard anything about a recent major fire in San Francisco. Several said they had, and this stimulated a discussion about how fires start. A pantomime fire was built in the middle of the circle, with the leader warning the group not to get too close. This evolved into a chant:

If you get too close
You can burn your pants;
If you burn your pants
It'll make you dance.

To the beat of a drum, each participant in turn did a fire dance around the imaginary fire. After each had danced, it was suggested that as a closure the fire be put out. The group tightly encircled the fire and blew it out.

In this particular example *improvisation* involved exploration of the concept of fire. *Selectivity* occurred as participants, guided by the leader, decided upon the best way to build the story. In acting out the fire story participants achieved *fulfillment*, and *closure* was achieved naturally because the story had a definite end.

Leadership Hints. All kinds of ideas can be expanded into Orff-Schulwerk experiences, with both participants and leader developing chants and using rhythm instruments to accentuate the chanting and movement. Activities can be simplified for severely retarded participants and easily expanded and made more complex according to participants'

abilities and creativity. When accompanied by the beat of a drum, deaf individuals can also take part, either by speaking or signing chants. There is no right or wrong--only the assumption that every individual is capable of creative growth.

PRESENTING A STORY

For people of all ages, acting out a story read by the leader is great fun. Some highly professional productions have been developed from what was originally a spontaneous interpretation of a story-reading. Short stories with plenty of action are particularly effective.

The reason acting out stories can be so successful is that it is a non-threatening kind of activity. Emotions and situations which the participants must act out are not *their* emotions or predicaments, but the feelings and expressions of a character in a story. In addition, this activity truly allows each to participate fully according to his/her own abilities. Those with freedom of movement can act; those with severely limited movement can make, arrange, and set up simple props. In some presentations, severely handicapped persons in wheelchairs have actually become parts of the scenery, such as the sun moving across the horizon or a car or bus passing by.

Some of the methods of acting out stories include:

- *Leader pauses while reading a story and the whole group acts out the particular action demanded;*
- *Leader assigns parts (or participants choose), and participants only act out parts of the story dealing with their particular character;*
- *Leader tells the whole story, the group divides it into scenes, and each scene is acted out;*
- *The group makes up stories to act out;*
- *Leader starts reading a story and asks the group, "And what happened next?" The whole group or individuals then act out the story's conclusion;*
- *Group acts out musical stories, either simultaneously or by assigning a part to each participant ("Peter and the Wolf," for example).*

Leadership Hints. Story narration must take participants' abilities into account. The narrator should read slowly enough for the slowest participant and be alert to repeat cues if necessary.

A part of the activity can be found for every participant, despite speech, mobility, or other limitations or apprehension to participate. Those who cannot read can act out parts; those who have severely limited movement can serve as narrators; those who are apprehensive to act may be assigned a group walk-on part;

all can enjoy simple behind-the-scenes activities, such as locating props, designing scenery, and making costumes. Often participants themselves can suggest or develop adaptations that permit them to take part in the activity. Certainly, no individual should be denied participation in these activities based on disability.

In terms of props, scenery, and costumes, these may make a story presentation more realistic for the players but should not *overwhelm*. The most successful approaches have been those utilizing the merest hint of scenery and costumes. For example, players wearing wide-brimmed hats with brightly colored towels draped over their shoulders stand in front of a brightly painted cardboard archway to set the scene in Mexico; waves cut out of cardboard and painted blue are pasted to two chairs, suggesting that participants are in rowboats; one player becomes a snow-capped mountain by draping an old blue sheet with a white circle painted in the middle over herself and her wheelchair.

Presenting a story can be easily adapted to ages of participants by selecting stories from different reading levels. The leader can find a wide variety of suitable stories among the plays and short stories in the public library. Or, participants can adapt or write their own stories. When involving mentally retarded participants, the leader should always consider chronological age rather than mental age in selecting stories. Better to re-write an adult's story with simpler words than to have a group of mentally retarded adults acting out a children's fairy tale.

ROLE PLAYING

Adolescents, adults, and individuals who have trouble handling their emotions or dealing with problems may enjoy this creative activity. In treatment settings for emotionally disturbed, behavior disordered, or mentally ill persons, role playing assumes a place with the other adjunctive therapies as a treatment modality. In such settings supervised role playing sessions have been found successful in helping participants face their problems, understand why other people act the way they do, and develop new ways of dealing with difficult situations.

Role playing can also be a fun addition to the recreational creative dramatics program, however. In this sense it often borders on improvisation as players select situations, occupations, and people to characterize.

Some activities for role playing include:

- *Individuals choose and attempt to portray a character, such as a courtroom judge, teacher, waiter/waitress;*
- *Two or more individuals act out a situation selected by the leader or chosen by the group;*
- *Leader describes a situation, then asks the whole group to act out what they would do if it happened to them.*

Leadership Hints. Unless supervised by a psychologist or trained psychodrama specialist, role playing should never be approached as a psychotherapeutic exercise. The leader might open the door to a situation that he/she is totally unprepared to adequately cope with and cause undue distress to a participant.

Even when role playing activities are recreational, the leader should never imply that the session is being held to examine participants' problems. It would be more appropriate for the leader to hold "What Bugs Me Is..." sessions in which each participant assumes the role of a character in a particularly annoying situation. This activity is both fun and cathartic for participants. The leader might also keep a box full of role play ideas written on pieces of paper; individuals draw from the box and then present the particular idea.

OTHER RELATED ACTIVITIES

The creative dramatics activities presented in this PRACTICAL POINTER suggest numerous possibilities for complimentary activities.

- *Making Masks -- use paper bags, newspapers, tempera paints, inexpensive masks from toy shops as bases for more elaborate creations, and chicken wire covered with papier mache; these can be colorfully painted and built upon using one's imagination. Many times individuals who fear performing before a group will more readily participate when protected by a mask. Cerebral palsied individuals who are self-conscious about facial distortions sometimes feel more comfortable when wearing a mask in initial creative dramatics activities.*

- *Make Up -- grease paint sticks are best for this, but be sure to first apply a thin layer of cream to each person's face. Be sure no one is allergic to such make-up.*

- *Dressing Up -- old clothes, long lengths of remnants, and a box of old hats can form the base of a costume collection. Participants might be asked to play the character that a certain hat or outfit suggests.*

- *Making Scenery -- use cardboard boxes, powdered paints, various sized brushes, chalk, felt-tip markers, rolls of plain paper, and recycled junk (polystyrene, tissue paper, cans, cardboard tubes, newspaper, string).*

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